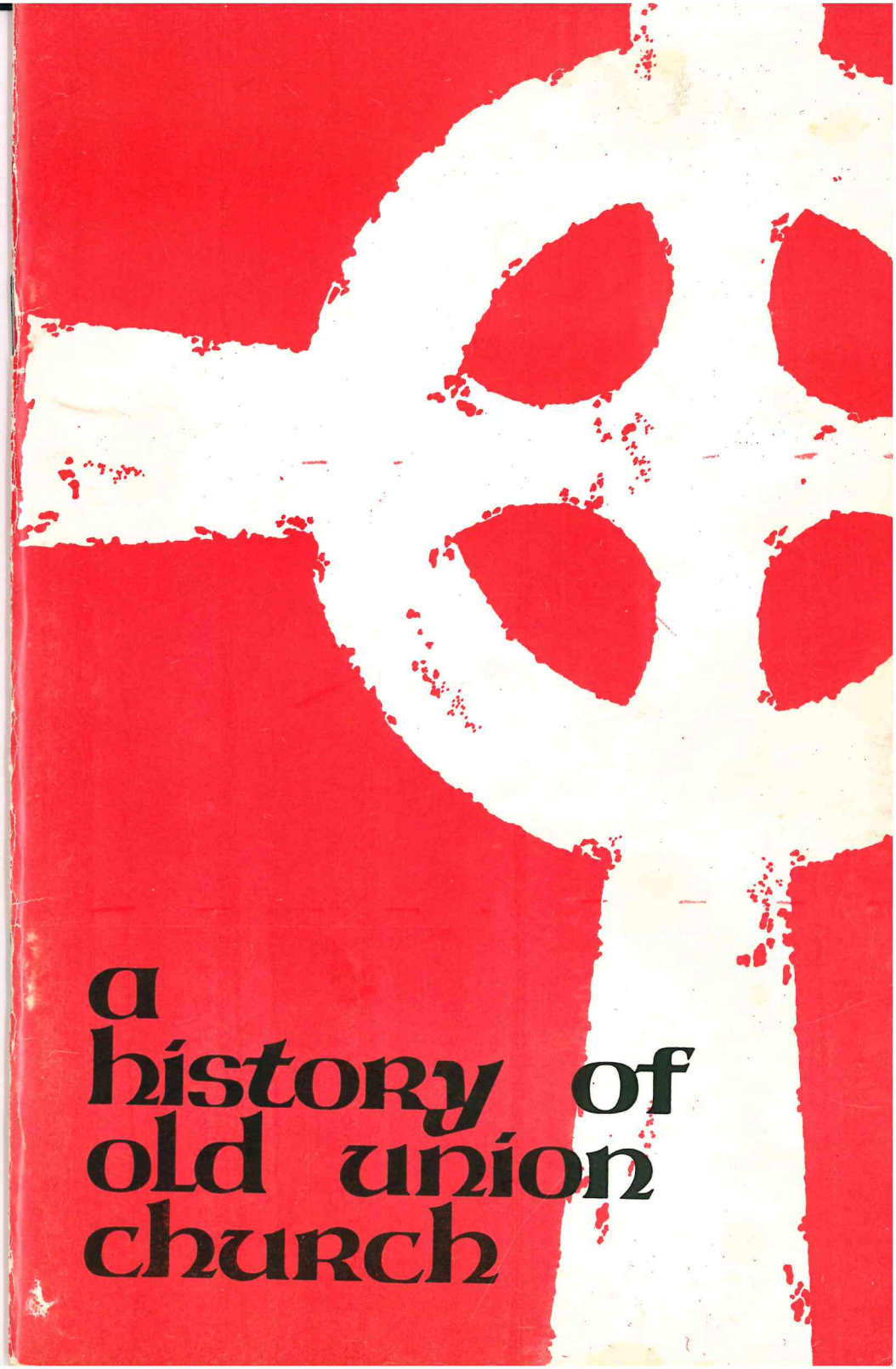
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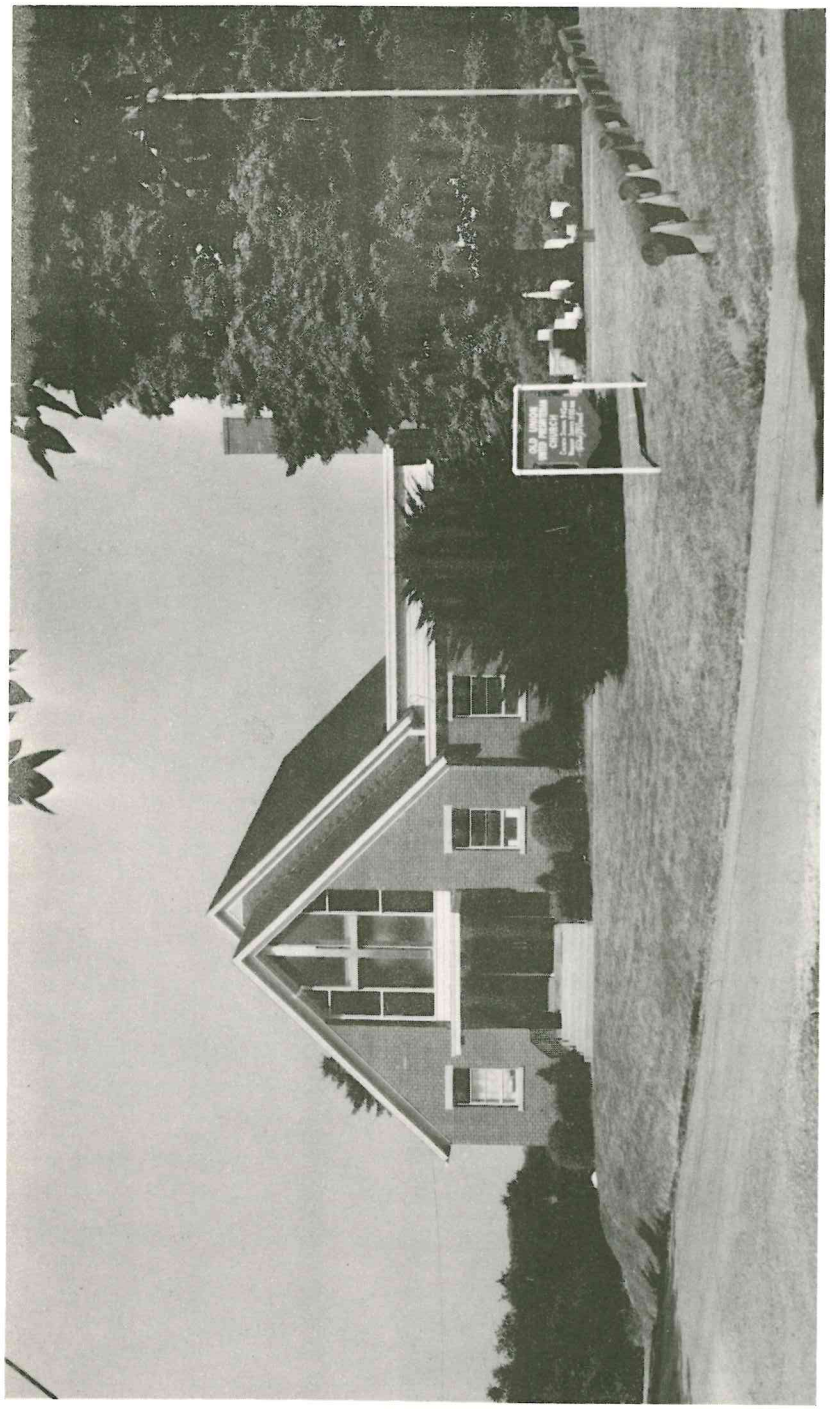

OLD UNION CHURCH – Present

A History of

OLD UNION CHURCH

Charles D. Cashdollar

August, 1973

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CONTENTS

Page

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCHES IN THE UNITED STATES
A Chart 6

THE EARLY YEARS 7

THE SCHISM OF 1833 9

A CHANGE IN DENOMINATION. 11

THE CIVIL WAR YEARS 12

YEARS OF GROWTH AND TRANSFORMATION. 14

THE CHANGING CHURCH: DISCIPLINE 16

THE CHANGING CHURCH: LITURGY. 18

FIRE AND RECOVERY 20

THE LOUDEN YEARS. 23

THE ZELIENOPLE JOINTURE. 26

SUPPLY PASTORS FROM MERIDIAN 27

A MODERN SELF-SUPPORTING CHURCH 28

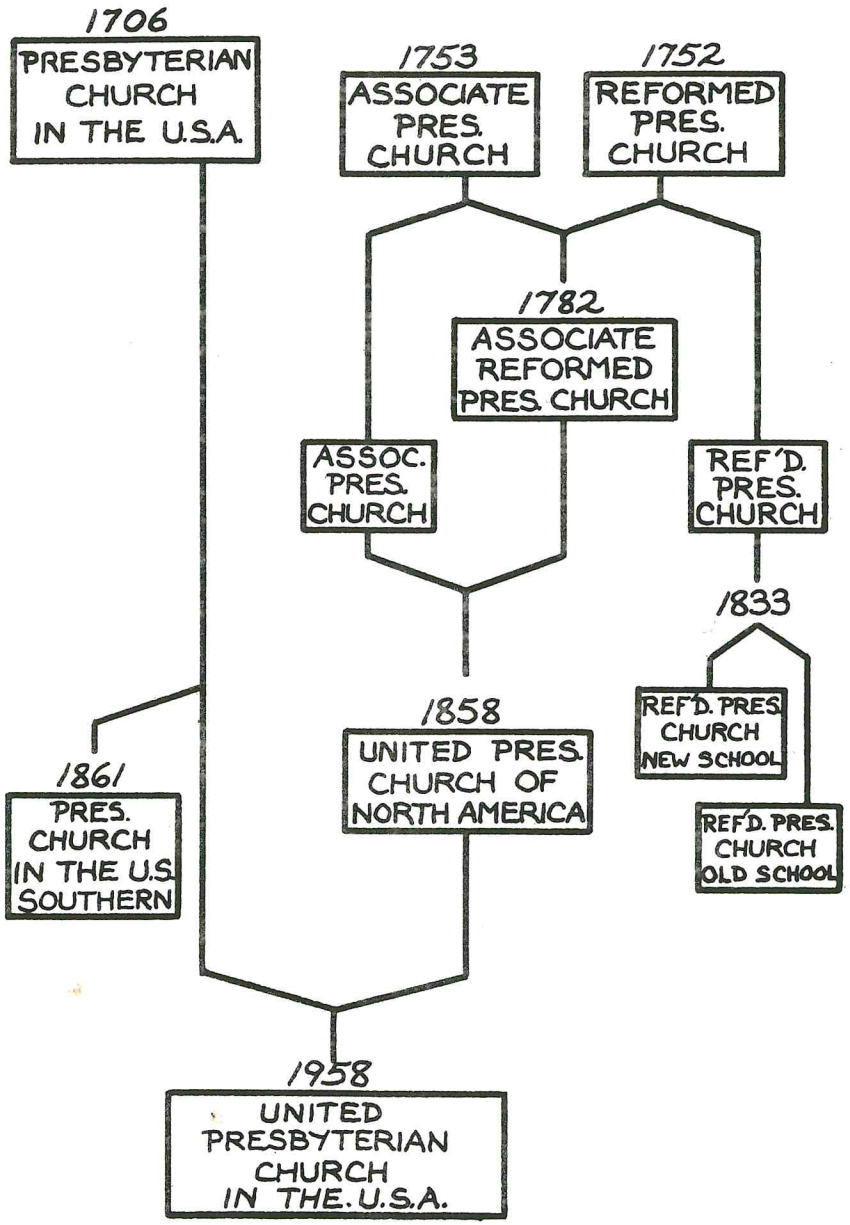
OLD UNION REACHES OUT. 35

OLD UNION IN PERSPECTIVE. 36

THE MEMBERSHIP OF OLD UNION CHURCH
1858-1973, A Graph 37

A NOTE ON SOURCES 38

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCHES IN THE U.S.A.



As the eighteenth century drew to a close, Butler County, Pennsylvania, was still an unbroken wilderness. Wild game and Indians moved freely through the tall, dark forests. The earliest white settler in the county, James Glover, built his first crude cabin in 1792 and began the task of breaking a clearing in the forest.[1] Glover was followed into the area by a steadily increasing group of hardy pioneer families who applied themselves to the task of transforming the wilderness into a prosperous community of homes, shops, and churches. Following closely behind these first settlers was a group of dedicated pioneer preachers who traveled from one isolated community to another by horseback. Their visits were welcomed by the residents as an opportunity for fellowship and Christian praise.

THE EARLY YEARS

As early as 1800 the Reverend John Black, an ordained minister in the Reformed Presbyterian Church, began to visit the communities of southern Butler County. Black, a graduate of the University of Glasgow, had come to America in 1797 and taught classics briefly at the University of Pennsylvania before being licensed for the ministry in 1799. The following year, he journeyed to Western Pennsylvania and was installed as pastor of the "Ohio Congregation," a parish centered in Pittsburgh but including all of Pennsylvania west of the Allegheny Mountains.

As the population continued to grow rapidly, it became increasingly difficult for Black to serve all of the pioneer settlements in and around Pittsburgh. In 1805 the Reverend Matthew Williams settled along the banks of the Connoquenessing near the present town of Zelienople and assumed the responsibility for that portion of Black's circuit north of Pittsburgh. Williams traveled to eight small Christian societies scattered over several counties. Under his

[1] *When Glover, a veteran of the American Revolution, died in 1844, he was buried in the cemetery of Old Union Church. Tradition has it that his cabin was located but a short distance east of that spot.*

direction one of these small groups was formally organized in 1806 as the Old Union congregation. The new church affiliated itself with the Ohio Conference of the Reformed Presbyterian Church.[2]

The Reverend Matthew Williams was born in July, 1768, in Ballymena, County Antrim, Ireland. He received a classical education in Edinburgh, Scotland, and in 1794 emigrated to the United States with his parents. He settled in Western Pennsylvania and under the influence of the Reverend John Black became a minister in the Reformed Presbyterian Church. The eight church circuit north of Pittsburgh was his first charge. One church historian writes that he was a "man of medium stature, and his bearing was solemn and dignified. He was well versed in theology, a fair speaker of simple and choice language, and told no anecdote in the pulpit. He was a creditable musician, a social and generous host, and his home was one of hospitable entertainment."[3]

From his home on the Connoquenessing, Williams traveled by horseback to worship with the Old Union congregation. At this time the Old Union members were meeting in a grove of trees along Straight Run near the present village of Brownsdale. There they erected an open-air pulpit and probably a crude, log shelter, which in common with other Covenanters they called their "tent." In spite of these primitive conditions, the congregation flourished and often as many as 300 persons were gathered for Communion. In 1815 Williams' circuit was divided and he was able to devote his full time to the Old Union, Pine Creek, and Deer Creek Churches. At this time Williams moved his family to the vicinity of the Pine Creek Church, the geographic center of his new circuit.

In 1820 the Old Union Church moved its meeting place from Straight Run to a site about one and a half miles south of the present location. Four years later the congregation purchased a two acre lot

[2] *The Reformed Presbyterian Church (1774) is the denominational descendant of the Reformed Church of Scotland. Its adherents are perhaps better known as "Covenanters" because of their insistence upon independent ecclesiastical and national covenants with God. Such sacred agreements bound both the church and the state to obey God's moral law. As the political exigencies of the seventeenth century made the British king head of the Church of Scotland, many Covenanters felt such royal supremacy compromised the principle of a church in covenant with God alone. They, therefore, refused allegiance to the established church. Severely persecuted for their beliefs, many Covenanters fled to Northern Ireland or to the American colonies.*

[3] *W. Melancthon Glasgow, History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America (Baltimore, 1888), p. 717.*

from Robert McKinney and erected a log church in a stand of trees which consequently came to be known as the Covenanter Woods. The church was a "primitive structure of hand hewn logs, small windows and a clapboard roof, fastened down with cross beams."[4] It was unheated and one can well imagine the heavy clothing necessary during the winter months. On one particularly bitter day, according to Williams' son, one of the local wits commented, "At least we were not troubled by mosquitoes today."[5]

In this crude, yet doubtless highly appreciated cabin, the Reverend Matthew Williams continued to hold regular services until he resigned in 1825 because of poor health. Worn by years of hard travel and stricken by an incurable paralytic disease, Williams died at 2:00 a.m., September 11, 1828, and was buried in the cemetery of the Pine Creek Church. His epitaph pays him this simple tribute: "He was a humble Christian and a faithful minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He lived and died in the faith of that Gospel which he had so long preached."

THE SCHISM OF 1833

After the resignation of Matthew Williams, the three churches–Old Union, Pine Creek, and Deer Creek–called the Reverend Thomas C. Guthrie to the pulpit in 1826. Guthrie was born in Broughshane, County Antrim, Ireland, on August 7, 1796. He emigrated to the United States because of ill health in 1817 and recuperated in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He soon recovered sufficiently to continue his studies and was graduated from the Western University of Pennsylvania (now the University of Pittsburgh) in 1823. After studying theology in Philadelphia, he was called to serve the Old Union, Pine Creek and Deer Creek Churches. Reputedly a man of considerable intellectual powers, a "proficient classical scholar and well-read in science and philosophy," Guthrie received an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from Franklin and Marshall College in 1843.[6]

During Guthrie's pastorate, the Reformed Presbyterian Church was the victim of a major schism concerning the participation of

[4] *S. L. Louden, History of Old Union United Presbyterian Church (Mars, Pennsylvania, 1950), p. 4.*

[5] *as quoted by Glasgow, History, p. 224.*

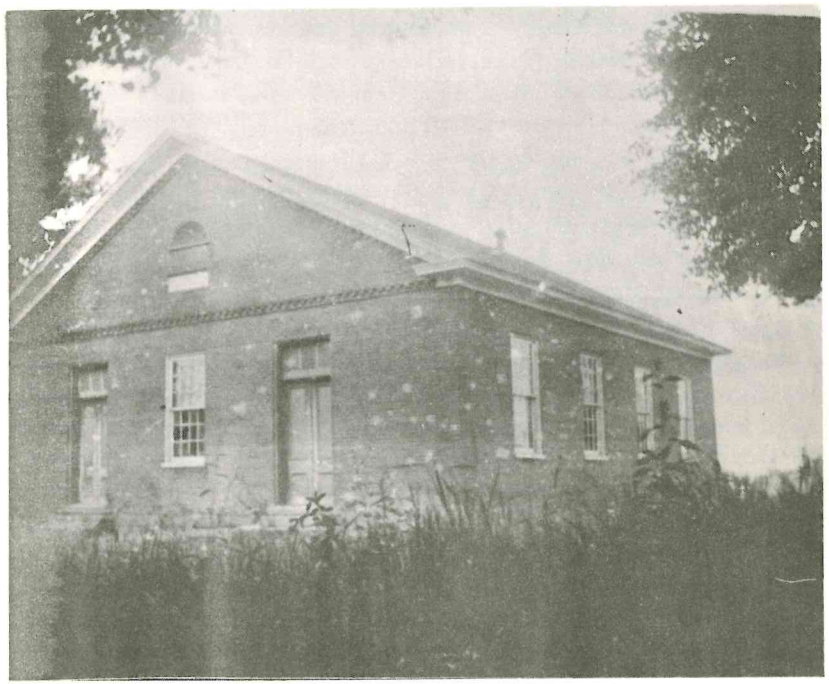
[6] *Ibid., p. 532.*

its members in matters of civil government. The denomination's convictions concerning the proper relationship of the church and state were a significant part of their heritage from the Scottish Covenanters. Following Old Testament patterns, each nation was expected to establish a covenant or sacred agreement with God in which it acknowledged its duties and obligations to Him. In Scotland such a National Covenant had been drawn up and periodically renewed, although the Covenanters complained almost perpetually about the royal government's arrogant failure to comply with the Covenant. When Scottish Covenanters arrived in America they were quick to notice that the United States Constitution, which was the closest approximation of a national covenant they could find, made no mention of the state's divine obligations. Throughout most of the nineteenth century, these Reformed Presbyterians carried on a campaign to have the Constitution amended to include words recognizing "the dominion of Jesus Christ over nations, and the nation's subjection to the Divine Law."

These immigrant American Covenanters did not hold such views lightly, sanctified as they were by the blood of Scottish martyrs. By the 1830's the agitation had created a division of opinion within the church. One faction, intent on maintaining a visible witness to the covenant ideal, vowed not to vote, hold office, or participate in any other way in the civil government until the Constitution was properly amended. Some of the members of the church even refused to become United States citizens until this matter was settled to their satisfaction. The second faction within the denomination also complained bitterly about the Constitution and its lack of an explicit acknowledgment of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. But they felt they could maintain a sufficient witness without isolating themselves so totally from American life. Indeed, they argued that the best hope of remedying the situation lay in active utilization of the political process. In 1833 the two factions separated completely. Those wishing to remain distant from the government organized themselves as the Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, or more popularly, the "Old School." Those wishing to participate in civil government became the General Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church or the "New School."

Guthrie and approximately one half of the members of the Old Union congregation chose to identify themselves with the "New School." The other half of the congregation, feeling that their loyalties were with the more conservative "Old School," left the church and in 1835 called the Reverend Hugh Walkinshaw to their pulpit. They purchased an adjacent piece of property and built a

frame house of worship. This "Old School" congregation is the parent church of the Mars Reformed Presbyterian Church and the North Union Reformed Presbyterian Church, both in existence at the present time. Guthrie and the "New School" held possession of the log church after the separation and continued to worship there until 1839. At that time they moved to the present location and erected a large brick building.



Old Brick Church – 1839-1905

A CHANGE IN DENOMINATION

Dr. Guthrie resigned in 1845, leaving the church without a pastor. Five years later the church, still without the service of a full time minister, was substantially weakened when the western portion of the congregation requested that they be allowed to organize their own congregation to avoid the long trip to worship services. This group was organized in 1850 as the Mount Pleasant Reformed

Presbyterian Church. In 1851 the newly organized Mount Pleasant Church and Old Union issued a joint call to the Reverend Andrew Walker. Walker remained but three years and again the congregations were without the services of a pastor. The 1850's continued to be a trying time for Old Union as the northern portion of the congregation also expressed a desire to form an independent church. The northern families left in 1859 and organized the Brownsdale congregation.

Thus weakened by the loss of members and greatly discouraged by the inability of the General Synod to provide the services of a minister, the Old Union congregation decided to abandon its ties with the Reformed Presbyterian Church and become a member of the newly created United Presbyterian Church of North America which had been organized in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in May, 1858. This change in denominational affiliation, completed in 1859, involved almost no modification in the beliefs or practices of the congregation. It was not an unusual step for a New School group to take. In fact, part of their difficulty in obtaining the services of a minister was that many New School clergy had preceded them in joining other Presbyterian bodies. The new United Presbyterian Church, a merger of the Associate Presbyterian Church and the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, was perhaps a bit more moderate than the New School of the Reformed Presbyterians, but it held to the same basic Calvinistic theology and shared such distinctive features as the exclusive use of psalms, a cappella singing, the restriction of Communion to members of the denomination, and the vigorous condemnation of slavery. For the Old Union Church, which had already signified its interest in a more moderate position by choosing the New School in 1833, the denominational change was a logical, practical step.

THE CIVIL WAR YEARS

In 1861 the Old Union congregation and the Brownsdale congregation (which had also decided to join the new United Presbyterian Church) called the Reverend Richard M. Patterson to the pulpit. Patterson, who was to serve the church through the explosize period of the American Civil War, was born May 13, 1832. He graduated from Franklin and Marshall College in 1857 and studied for the ministry at Allegheny Seminary prior to his ordination and installation on November 11, 1861, as pastor of the Old Union and Brownsdale congregations. He received an annual salary of $600 from the two churches.

The years of Patterson's ministry were violent ones in United States history. In 1861 the seething slavery controversy exploded into a long, bloody war between the armies of the North and the South. This struggle over slavery was soon to disrupt the quiet routine of the Old Union congregation. The denominations with which the church was affiliated had long been outspoken in their opposition to slavery. As early as 1801 slave holders had been barred from the Reformed Presbyterian communion table. When the United Presbyterian Church was organized in 1858, it also went on record against slavery with this statement: "Slaveholding–that is the holding of unoffending beings in involuntary bondage, and considering and treating them as property, and subject to be bought and sold–is a violation of the law of God, and contrary both to the letter and the spirit of Christianity."

It was soon evident, however, that for Old Union members, at least, such disapprovals of slavery did not translate automatically into enthusiasm for the Civil War. Some members did not think that this was clearly and simply a war against slavery. Others wondered whether war was an appropriate means of eradicating the evil of slavery. The congregation debated the matter with considerable vehemence. On one occasion two members met on the bridge over Breakneak Creek and attempted to settle the issue with their fists.

The matter remained a persistent undercurrent among the church members until the winter of 1862-63 when President Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation. The war and slavery were now irrevocably tied together. The Reverend Richard Patterson, following firmly in the anti-slavery tradition of the United Presbyterians, had no sympathy for the evil institution and supported the war for its elimination. He made his views quite clear in vigorous and outspoken sermons. Now Patterson's enthusiasm for the Emancipation Proclamation brought a challenge from a small, yet vocal group of Democrats. The Session, although itself divided on the Proclamation, supported Patterson's right to preach his conscience and condemned those members critical of his sermons.[7] One elder, likely Joseph Johnston or Joshua Davidson, extended himself somewhat further and commented that in light of the circumstances he did not see how any member of the Democratic party could still be a Christian.

[7] *At their March 21, 1863, meeting, the elders recorded their views on the Emancipation Proclamation. Joseph Johnston and Joshua Davidson expressed approval of Lincoln's action, while Jacob Hutchman and Samuel Boyd voiced disapproval. Jacob Stoup was absent.*

At this point the Democrats erupted with fury. They challenged the integrity of the Session and tried to explain that they were not really opposed to the abolition of slavery but merely to a war for that purpose. When the dissidents tried to carry their complaint to the presbytery, the elders refused to allow them access to the Session minutes to prepare their case. The Session evidently took this challenge to their authority seriously and during the remaining months of 1863 suspended some 20 of the dissident members from the congregation.

Time has its way of healing such wounds, however. During the final year of the war, amends were made and nearly all the dissident Democrats, apologizing and pledging anew their loyalty to the church and its ruling elders, were reinstated. One of the more stubborn Democrats, James Wallace, held out until the very end of the war. He had not been returned to his privileges more than a few weeks, however, when he was once again summoned before the Session for political irregularities. Wallace had apparently been unable to contain his glee over the assassination of President Lincoln and was now to be charged with condoning the violation of sixth commandment. Wallace refused to answer the summons and the Session suspended him indefinitely.

In spite of the fact that such political questions had unsettled the church's life, the congregation continued to grow under Patterson's strong leadership. In October, 1864, the members felt strong enough to assume his entire salary and Patterson began to devote his full time to the Old Union congregation. It was the first time the church had enjoyed the full time services of a minister.

In 1866 Patterson, always an ardent supporter of Negro rights, asked for and received a leave of absence to serve as superintendent of a Freedman's School in Knoxville, Tennessee. The school was but one of several institutions operated by the United Presbyterians to provide education and support for the newly freed slave. The Old Union congregation contributed generously to the support of this school. A year later in 1867 Patterson returned to a prosperous Old Union. Membership now totaled 107. A Sabbath School had been established with 10 teachers and 60 pupils. Patterson continued to serve until September, 1867, when he resigned to assume a joint pastorate in Troy and Springfield, Michigan.

YEARS OF GROWTH AND TRANSFORMATION

The late nineteenth century has often been referred to as the "critical period" in American church history. It was an age in which

the nation's industrial might was magnified and new social forms emerged. Many congregations were confronted with the necessity of adapting their style of ministry to this new society. Old Union remained, basically, a rural congregation and so escaped much of the trauma which befell other churches. Still, it was significantly transformed. Within thirty years, it abandoned its distinctive liturgical pattern, modified its concept of church discipline, and doubled the size of its membership.

Three ministers guided the congregation during these years of growth and transformation. After Patterson's departure in 1867, the Old Union pulpit remained vacant until 1871 when the congregation, together with the Brownsdale church, issued a call to the Reverend Robert G. Young. Young was born in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on July 14, 1841. He studied at the Western University of Pennsylvania and Allegheny Seminary. On September 5, 1871, he was ordained and installed as pastor of the two churches. Young continued to serve the two churches until April, 1875.[8]

After five years without a minister, the Reverend Robert P. McClester was installed as pastor of the Old Union and Brownsdale congregations on June 15, 1880. McClester was born in Beaver County, Pennsylvania, and educated at Westminster College and Allegheny Seminary. He continued as pastor of the two churches until June, 1890, when he accepted a call to the Grove City Church.

Four years after McClester departed, Old Union called the Reverend Robert Addison Gilfillan to occupy the vacant pulpit. Gilfillan had been born in Mercer County, Pennsylvania, on January 16, 1844. He served with the 100th Pennsylvania Volunteers during the Civil War and was wounded in the chin at Cold Harbor. Accordto legend, he merely wrapped the wound with his handkerchief and valiantly continued to fight. After the war he decided to enter the ministry and studied at Westminster College and Allegheny Seminary. He served congregations in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Kansas before coming to Old Union in October, 1894. He served the congregation until his death in 1898.

[8] *Five years after he left Old Union and Brownsdale, Young was suspended by the United Presbyterian Church for holding "some peculiar views upon Faith" and refusing to administer the Sacraments. The exact nature of Young's deviation is unclear. There is nothing to indicate any irregularities or controversies during his years at Old Union. Young was restored to the ministry in 1887. See James Brown Scouller, A Manual of the United Presbyterian Church of North America (Pittsburgh, 1887), p. 661.*

The years encompassed by the ministries of these three men were prosperous ones for Old Union. It was during McClester's pastorate that the greatest increase in the size of the congregation occurred. The membership expanded from 132 in 1880 to a peak of 200 in 1885. This considerable growth was the result of the extension of the effects of industrialism into the community. In December, 1878, the Pittsburgh and Western Railroad opened a line from Etna to Zelienople. This railroad, which followed the valley of the Breakneak Creek just west of Old Union, greatly increased the economic potential of the area. The discovery of new petroleum deposits south of Butler proved an even greater stimulus to the community. The rich Bald Ridge Field, the first in the immediate vicinity of Old Union, was opened in Forward and Penn Townships in 1881. In December, 1883, drilling companies leased 2000 acres in Adams and Cranberry Townships and began drilling for oil. In November, 1885, the discovery of still another field near Mars continued to push the population upward. From 1880 to 1890 the number of residents in Adams and Forward Townships rose approximately 55 percent. Old Union's membership, reflecting this population growth, expanded equivalently during the 1880's.

THE CHANGING CHURCH: DISCIPLINE

The growing length of its membership roll was only one part of the transformation of Old Union during the late nineteenth century. More important changes occurred in the thought and practice of the congregation. By 1900 the church had significantly modified its manner of defining and enforcing standards of morality among its members. From their earliest days in America, Presbyterian sessions played a major part in settling community disputes. One can hardly overestimate their importance as a regulating force, especially in the early days before a system of state and county courts was fully established. Old Union's Session was no exception. From time to time it was called to settle financial disputes, boundary questions, charges of libel, and even a case of forgery. In such instances, it acted as a court, calling witnesses and hearing testimony from each side.

As a workable system of legal courts emerged in the county, the Session's importance as an arbiter in civil or criminal suits naturally diminished. But the Session's devotion to directing and controlling the moral atmosphere of the community remained firm. The elders understood affiliation with a Christian congregation to include commitment to a distinctive, pietistic life style. It was the

Session's obligation to define acceptable standards of piety and insure the members' conformity to them.

During the late nineteenth century, the Session considered a wide range of moral issues from gossip to working on the Sabbath, invariably taking the conservative stand typical of the United Presbyterian Church of North America. Like their denomination, the elders were suspicious of many forms of public entertainment such as the theater and dancing. In 1872, when the establishment of a local dancing pavilion threatened the piety of the church's young adults, the Session went on record as opposing picnics and dancing with the following resolution:

> *That whereas it is known by the session that some of the members of this congregation have been engaging in Picnics, partaking chiefly of the nature of the Public Ball or dance, and whereas the Assembly has taken action denouncing such sinful amusements, Therefore Res. that we as a Session notify the members of our Congregation to refrain from all such amusements. And Res. that we as a Session feel bound for the honor of Christ and his cause to bring under censure such persons who persist in such conduct.*

The Session was equally forthright in its opposition to secret fraternal organizations. The United Presbyterians had long feared that allegiance to such an organization would conflict with a member's allegiance to Christ's church. Throughout the nineteenth century the Session regularly suspended any member who joined a secret society such as the Masons, Odd Fellows, or Patrons of Husbandry. As the temperance movement spread through the United States in the 1860's and 1880's, the congregation joined the crusade against liquor. Mrs. R. A. Gilfillan organized an active Loyal Temperance Legion among the young and the Session waged a valiant, if only moderately successful, campaign to chastise the adult members for their use of alcoholic beverages.

The usual disciplinary action for violations of the moral code was suspension. This prohibited the member from receiving the sacraments and participating in the full fellowship of the church. The sanction was freely invoked, even for relatively minor offenses such as gossip. When an offender manifested sincere repentance for his deviance, he could be restored to the rights and privileges of the congregation. Presumably it was an effective punishment. In a tight rural community the pressure from one's peers when combined with the sanction of the church would have been considerable.

By the late 1880's, however, we can discern definite changes in the philosophy of the Session regarding piety and church disci-

pline. In the first place, its definition of piety was gradually becoming less restrictive. In 1887, for example, the Session refused to condemn dancing, an activity which fifteen years earlier had been the regular victim of its wrath. More importantly, the liberalization was reflected in the nature and severity of the punishment meted out by the Session. These changes were not unique to Old Union. Throughout American Presbyterianism there was a lessened emphasis upon the innate depravity of man and a greater emphasis on the social setting as a determinant of deviant behavior. Under the influence of this broadened, liberal philosophy, the Session was less eager to suspend members for violations of the moral code. Now, rather than placing the member beyond the church body and its influence, it became common practice to merely admonish the member and retain him in his privileges. The hope was that the contact with fellow Christians would be more beneficial than ostracism. The greatest changes occurred during McClester's pastorate and one can assume that they reflected his thought. The transformation seems to have appeared earliest in temperance matters where the physiological nature of the deviance had long made moral suasion less successful. In one such case, a member was repeated called before the Session for drinking. The elders showed what can only be regarded as amazing patience with the man and at one point expressed their new philosophy this way: "Taking all the circumstances surrounding his case and in hope that it might be a means of regaining him from the evil and sin that he has fallen into, Res. that he be continued in the enjoyment of his privileges." By 1900 this approach had become the standard practice in matters of church discipline. Considering the fact that similar liberalization led to bitter argumentation and even charges of heresy in other congregations, Old Union's transformation was effected with remarkably little evidence of contention.

THE CHANGING CHURCH: LITURGY

But Old Union did not always change its ways so gracefully. In the 1890's, during the pastorate of the Reverend Robert A. Gilfillan, the introduction of an organ into the church touched off a major feud within the congregation. The United Presbyterians, like the Covenanters before them, traditionally had plain tastes in church music. Intent on following to the letter what they believed to be Biblical practice, they sang only psalms, not modern, man-made hymns, and refused to allow any musical instruments to accompany them in worship. The congregation was led in song, not by an organ,

but by a church official known as the precentor. This man, setting the proper pitch and tempo, would sing the psalm's first line, which the congregation repeated. The procedure continued, line by line, until all the verses of the psalm had been sung.

The distinctive musical form was a source of much pride to many United Presbyterians, but to others it was unduly confining. In 1881, after heated debate, the United Presbyterian General Assembly voted 620½ to 612½ to permit the use of musical instruments at the discretion of the local congregation. The Assembly, fearing that its sharp divisions might be duplicated in each local church, warned the congregations "to abstain . . . from any action in this matter that would disturb the peace and harmony of congregations, or unreasonably disregard the conscientious conviction of members."[9]

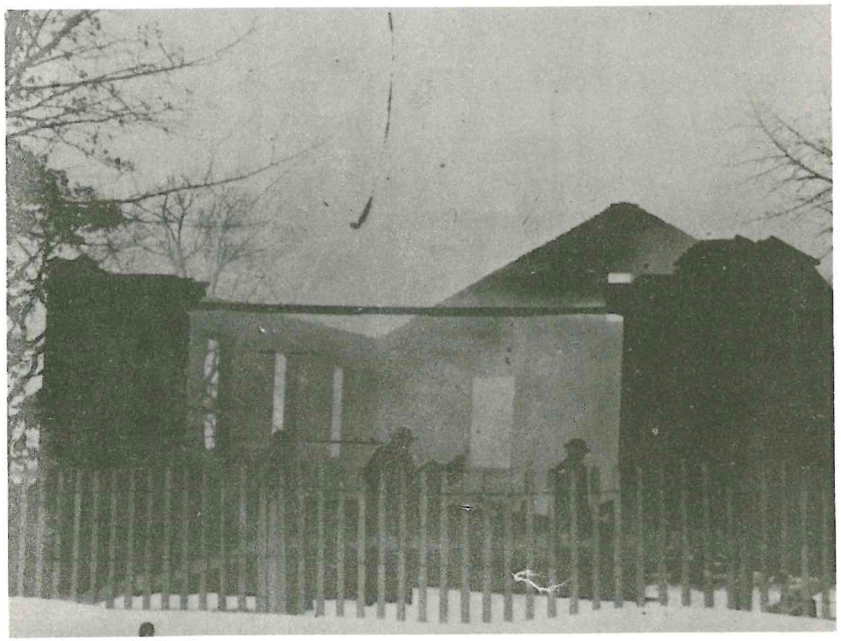
For fourteen years Old Union held to the traditional, unaccompanied manner of praise. Its precentor, Jacob Hutchman, continued to line out each psalm during worship. In May, 1895, the congregation voted 73 to 18 to introduce an organ into their church service. In spite of the continued protests of an extremely adamant minority led by Jacob Hutchman, the trustees, with the aid of music director, J. R. Stoup, purchased and installed an organ in the sanctuary. Mrs. R. A. Gilfillan and Miss Lola McCandless were the first organists.

The use of the organ remained a source of much bitterness for several years after its purchase. A small minority never really accepted the instrument as a legitimate form of praise. In the election of new members to the Session in 1896, the use of the instrument was a basic issue. Unfortunately, what had begun as a liturgical and theological question was transformed during the heat of the election into a highly personal feud. In 1897 after appealing in vain to the Presbytery for redress, eighteen members including former precentor Jacob Hutchman, who was also Clerk of Session at the time, asked for and were granted permission to transfer to another church. Hutchman, feeling betrayed by the congregation which he had served so long, explained that "he had been whipped by the congregation for his past course, and he proposed to meekly take his whipping, ask his letter, and go where it would not be repeated." How meekly he responded is questionable, however, since for a time he refused to surrender the Session records which were in his possession.

Despite the organ feud which had broken the peace of his ministry, the Reverend Robert A. Gilfillan was apparently a respected and well loved pastor. When he was found dead in a field where he

[9] *as quoted in George P. Hays, Presbyterians (New York, 1892), p. 438.*

had been cradling oats on August 6, 1898, the congregation was greatly grieved. Very few families of the congregation were not represented at his burial in Bennett, Pennsylvania, despite the distance and the steady downpour of rain. The Session, recording its sentiments, stated, "We feel the loss sustained by the congregation is a heavy one, and the place he occupied will be hard to fill. . . . That it was our privilege to enjoy the ministrations of Rev. R. A. Gilfillan for a space of four years, during which time we found him to be a man consecrated to the cause of Christ; and a faithful and laborious pastor, who was in season, and out of season, intent on the Master's work." By the end of Gilfillan's ministry the transformation of Old Union was complete. It had successfully adjusted to the changes of the late nineteenth century and now looked forward to the dawn of a new century with a new image and new hope.



Fire of 1905

FIRE AND RECOVERY

Gilfillan was succeeded in 1900 by the Reverend William M. Nichol. Nichol was born in Harrison County, Ohio, on March 13, 1846. He graduated from Princeton in 1887 and then studied for the ministry at Allegheny Seminary. After serving as a missionary in Mansoora, Egypt, for a period, he returned to the United States and was

installed as pastor of Old Union on June 7, 1900. He remained there until April, 1904, when he moved to the Second United Presbyterian Church, Brooklyn, New York.

On February 5, 1905, a little less than a year after Nichol left Old Union, the brick church which had housed the congregation since 1839 was completely destroyed by fire. It was a bitterly cold Sabbath morning and the two pot-bellied stoves which heated the church had been fired too heavily. Sparks escaping from one of these stoves set the roof on fire. Sabbath School was just beginning when one member who was still standing outside noticed black smoke billowing out near the chimney. He raced into the church, interrupted the singing, and shouted to the people that the church was on fire. The first inclination of the congregation was disbelief, but they were soon persuaded at least to go out and look for themselves. By this time flames as well as smoke were visible and there was little trouble convincing the group that the church really was on fire.

The church that was burning was a beautiful house of worship. Its inner walls were covered with a light green paper. In the center of the ceiling was a rather large gold rosette. On either side of this was an ornate oil lamp chandelier. The pews were straight-backed, each one numbered and occupied regularly by a specific family. There was no central aisle. Rather, the pews were separated into three sections by two main aisles. The center section was divided down the middle by a railing remaining from the early days of the church when the men and women were segregated during the worship service.

Since there were no fire companies in the area and it was futile to attempt to stop the blaze by hand, there was little that the men could do except try to carry out everything they could before the roof collapsed. They managed to save the pulpit furniture, the organ, some other small pieces of furniture, and most of the Bibles and psalters. Before anything else could be removed, the roof crashed down and the men had to stand helplessly and watch the flames consume the remainder of the building.

Some people in the congregation, now numbering but 90 members and without a minister, were understandably discouraged and despaired of ever rebuilding. The majority of the congregation, however, quickly recovered from the initial shock of the fire and made plans to rebuild the church. They used Beers School, a neighboring one-room school house built in 1900, as a temporary sanctuary. The new church was completed at a cost of $6,000 and dedicated in 1906.

Brick Church Erected 1906

Old Union Members – 1910

The first minister to occupy the new sanctuary was the Reverend J. O. McCown. McCown, a native of Tennessee, spent three years as an elementary school teacher and one year as a student of medicine at the University of Tennessee before deciding to enter the ministry. He then studied at Cedarville College and Erskine College before attending Allegheny Seminary. He graduated from seminary in the Spring of 1906 and was ordained at Old Union in September of the same year. McCown remained at Old Union through the winter of 1906-07 but in March, 1907, he left to begin work organizing a new congregation in Everett, Washington.

For the next three years the Old Union congregation was without a pastor. In 1910 Old Union joined with the Brownsdale United Presbyterian Church to extend a call to the Reverend D. Glenn Moore. Moore was born in Lawrence, Pennsylvania, on November 1, 1873. He received his bachelor's degree from Washington and Jefferson College in 1898 and then studied for the ministry at Allegheny Seminary. From 1902 to 1910 Moore worked as a missionary and teacher in Cairo, Egypt. Moore continued to serve the Old Union and Brownsdale churches until August, 1913.

In December, 1914, the pastoral vacancy at Old Union and Brownsdale was filled by the Reverend John S. Dice. Dice was born November 12, 1844, near Poland Center, Ohio. In 1866 he graduated from Westminster College. After teaching three years of school, he had saved enough money to continue his education at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. He completed his studies there in 1872. In February, 1874, he began his work as pastor of the United Presbyterian Church in Bethel, Pennsylvania, where he served for forty years before coming to Old Union. He remained with Brownsdale and Old Union until May, 1919, when he retired from the ministry.

THE LOUDEN YEARS

A few days after Dice retired, Mars United Presbyterian Church agreed to share its minister, the Reverend S. L. Louden, with Old Union. Louden was born in West Sunbury, Pennsylvania, in 1876. He graduated from Grove City College in 1902 and entered Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. After completing his studies there in 1905, he took a charge at Sandy Lake United Presbyterian Church. In 1911 he came to Mars and eight years later assumed the additional responsibility of serving Old Union. During his tenure at Mars and Old Union, he was awarded an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree by Grove City College. He continued as pastor of Old Union until January, 1937,

when because of increasing age he decided to limit his work to the Mars congregation. He remained with the Mars church until his retirement in 1950.

During Louden's pastorate, the membership of Old Union dropped to the lowest level since before the Civil War. The congregation decreased from a total of 116 at the time of Louden's arrival in 1919 to a low of 78 in 1928, a drop of 33 per cent. Sabbath School enrollment dropped from 72 to 40. The years of the 1920's and 1930's were not prosperous ones for major religious bodies anywhere in the United States, but at Old Union the national trends were exaggerated by certain local peculiarities. Part of the difficulty was that the Mars and Old Union congregations, only four miles apart, drew many of their members from the same area. Louden typically conducted his Sabbath morning service at Mars and then, after a hurried dinner, traveled by streetcar to conduct an afternoon service at Old Union. Under these far from ideal circumstances, Old Union found it difficult to compete with the Mars congregation for members. Many people, given the choice of hearing Louden at Mars in the morning or at Old Union in the afternoon, understandably chose the morning service.

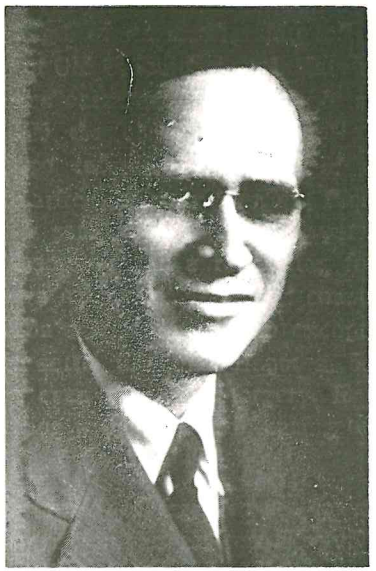
A more important reason for this decrease in membership, however, was the sharp drop in the total population of Adams and Forward Townships, the two primary sources of Old Union's numbers. The abundance of oil which was responsible for the pre-1900 surge in population was virtually depleted by 1910. With no replacement for the oil industry, the population of Adams Township dropped 30 per cent from its 1890 peak before it started to rise again in the late 1920's. The population of Forward Township fell even more sharply than that of Adams Township and did not begin to recover until the 1930's. Thus when Old Union celebrated its 125th anniversary in 1931, it presented a stark contrast to the prosperous congregation it had been during the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

In January, 1937, shortly after Louden's decision to devote all of his time to the Mars congregation, two members of the Session, Clarence Hartung and W. M. Davison, contacted the Reverend Lewis Brown of the Evans City United Presbyterian Church and secured his part time service for Old Union. Brown had only served eight months, however, when he resigned as minister of Evans City and Old Union to accept a call to the West View United Presbyterian Church.

S. L. Louden – 1919-1937

Robert McCaslin – 1938-1941

Dwight A. Nichol – 1945-1947



George Hutton – 1947-1955

THE ZELIENOPLE JOINTURE

In October, 1937, the Old Union congregation organized a joint pastorate with the Zelienople United Presbyterian Church and arranged for Robert McCaslin, a third year seminary student, to serve as student pastor until his graduation. McCaslin was born in Butler, Pennsylvania, on June 6, 1912. He completed his under-graduate work at Geneva College and then entered the study for the ministry at Pittsburgh-Xenia Theological Seminary. When he finished his work there in July, 1938, he began to serve the two congregations as an ordained minister. His pastoral leadership was effective and Old Union's rolls showed a marked increase. Although he still held afternoon services at Old Union, the young minister was extremely popular and able to capitalize on the increasing population of the community. In 1939 the church's membership reached 150 for the first time since the fire of 1905.

By the 1930's the impact of the previous century's theological transformations was apparent in the noticeably diminished role of the Session. Its last formal trial, complete with witnesses and recorded testimony, had been in 1914. Now, in the twentieth century, the Session was primarily an administrative body, still interested, to be sure, in the spiritual growth of the church, but hardly the stern, austere judicatory it had once been. Its responsibility for the members of the congregation was now seen as a generalized, not specific, one. In March, 1940, the Old Union congregation, in a decision reflecting the lessened power and prestige of the Session, voted to elect elders to a limited term of four years rather than the traditional life term. Later, in 1958, after the denominational merger with the Presbyterian Church, the term would be shortened to three years and the provision added that no elder could serve more than two consecutive terms.

Throughout the 1940's, Old Union remained a small congregation unable to support a full time minister. In December, 1941, when McCaslin resigned as pastor of the Zelienople and Old Union congregations, the two immediately began a joint effort to find a replacement. In the Spring of 1942, they secured the services of the Reverend Clifford E. Simpson, a recent graduate of Pittsburgh-Xenia Theological Seminary. Simpson, a native of Pittsburgh, had studied at the University of Pittsburgh before entering seminary. He remained with the two churches until August, 1944, when he resigned to enter the United States Army Chaplaincy. The Zelienople congregation meanwhile had enlarged considerably and felt that it could support its own minister. The bond which existed between Old Union and Zelienople since 1937 was accordingly dissolved in 1945.

SUPPLY PASTORS FROM MERIDIAN

In April, 1945, the same month that the working arrangement with Zelienople was terminated, the Meridian United Presbyterian Church agreed to share its pastor with Old Union. The Reverend Dwight A. Nichol, who had been in Meridian since December, 1943, began his work as stated supply pastor at Old Union in December, 1945. Nichol had been born in White Township, a short distance north of Indiana, Pennsylvania, on December 29, 1899. After graduating from Muskingum College in 1921, he entered Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. His first charge was in Bolivar, Pennsylvania, from 1927 to 1929. Nichol next served as a missionary in Ratagiri, India, for six years. Returning to the United States in 1935, he served congregations in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, and Aurora, Illinois, before coming to Meridian.

After Nichol left in March, 1947, to assume pastoral duties in Greeley, Colorado, the two churches issued a call to the Reverend George Hutton. A native of Chicago, Hutton did his undergraduate work at Muskingum College and then studied for the ministry at Xenia Seminary in St. Louis. He received his bachelor's degree there in 1928 and his Master of Theology degree in 1930. After serving congregations in Illinois and Michigan, he moved to Meridian and (Old Union in September, 1947.

Except for a temporary decrease in membership in the early 1950's, the church prospered statistically during Hutton's ministry. By the end of his pastorate in 1955, Old Union had 176 members. The church budget reflecting this growth in membership and the effects of the post-war inflation, increased from $2226 in 1946 to $5896 in 1955. By that year, the congregation, greatly encouraged by the continuing increase in its numbers, began to think seriously about the possibility of becoming a self-sufficient church with its own minister. Hutton gave the members strong support in their hopes for independence. On February 13, 1955, they voted unanimously to end their ties to the Meridian church and obtain the services of H. Ross Karnes, a third year seminarian at Pittsburgh-Xenia Theological Seminary. Karnes was not yet ordained, but since he agreed to stay on at the completion of his studies, it was a significant step toward the congregation's goal of independence.

A MODERN SELF-SUPPORTING CHURCH

Ross Karnes promptly moved into Old Union's newly remodeled manse and assumed his duties as student supply pastor.[10] A native of Zanesville, Ohio, Karnes majored in sociology at Sterling College, a small United Presbyterian school in Kansas, before entering Pittsburgh-Xenia Theological Seminary in 1953. He continued to serve Old Union in a student capacity until he completed his seminary work in May, 1956. At that time he was ordained and installed as the minister of the congregation. He was the first clergyman to serve solely at Old Union since 1907, a period of nearly fifty years. Karnes remained with the congregation until January, 1962, when he moved to the Ellwood City United Presbyterian Church.

The Karnes years were prosperous ones for Old Union. During his seven years in the pulpit, the congregation's size increased by sixty-six per cent to a total of 292 members in 1961. This remarkable growth was due partly to the quality of life at Old Union and partly to larger forces affecting the setting in which it operated. In the first place, burgeoning church rolls were not uncommon anywhere in the United States during the 1950's. Nationally these were years of one of the major religious revivals in American history. Stimulated by tensions resulting from foreign and domestic crises–atomic bombs and the Cold War, automation and conformism, mass society and a search for identity–Americans returned to churches in greater numbers than ever before.[11] The people living near c Old Union were no different. They, too, crowded into the church for Sunday worship or an occasional week-long revival meeting led by guest preachers such as John Gerstner or Addison Leitch of Pittsburgh-Xenia Seminary.

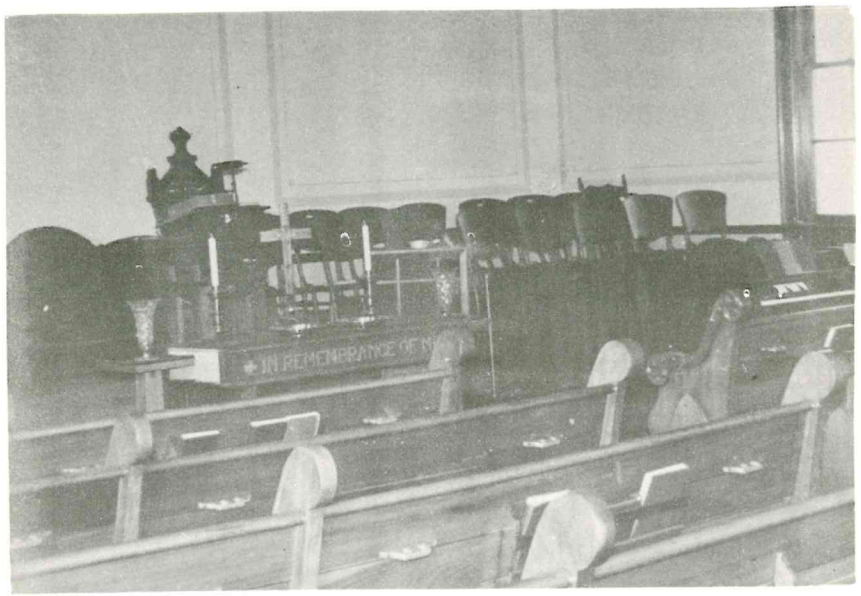
This nation-wide revival would doubtless have caused a somewhat enlarged membership by itself, but Old Union's potential for growth was further enhanced by a marked increase in the population of the surrounding area. During the decade of the 1950's, the population

[10] *The manse, a two story frame structure situated across the road from the church, had been built in 1888. It was substantially renovated in 1946 and again in 1955 just prior to Karnes' arrival. During the long period from 1907 to 1955 when there was no clergyman to occupy the house, it was generally let for rent by the congregation.*

[11] *For additional discussion of this revival, the reader is referred to Will Herberg: Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology (New York, 1955), A Roy Eckardt, The Surge of Piety in America: An Appraisal (New York, 1958 , and Martin E. Marty, The New Shape of American Religion (New York, 1958).*

Ground-breaking – 1958

Junior Girls Class – 1958



Sanctuary – 1958

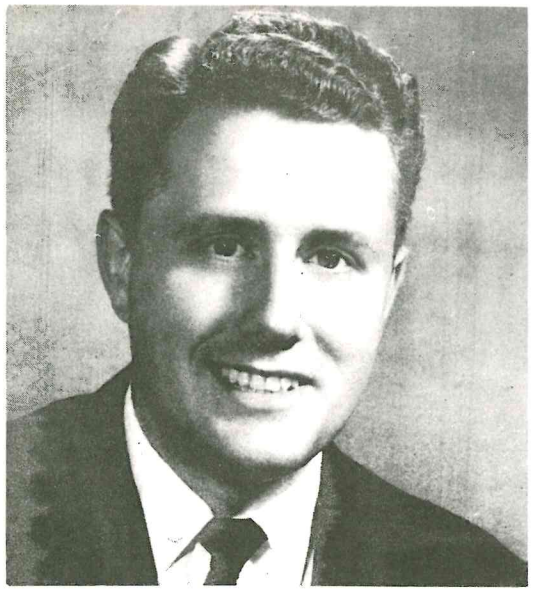
Adult Sunday School Classes – 1958

of Adams Township grew by fifty per cent and that of Forward Township by forty-eight per cent. This rapid surge resulted from the general post-war population explosion, the movement of people away from urban centers like Pittsburgh and into the adjacent suburban districts, and the substantially larger number of job opportunities in the Mars area, especially the arrival and expansion of such firms as the Callery Chemical Company and the Research Division of Mine Safety Appliances.

Throughout the decade, Old Union proved able to capitalize on the opportunities for growth afforded by the trends of national religious renewal and local population growth. Karnes was a gifted preacher and popular leader, especially among the young. His ministry received inestimable support from a large and ambitious choir directed by Kate Rea. Special choral programs or popular "hymn sings" invariably drew overflow crowds. Despite its increasing size, Old Union seemed to retain its reputation as a friendly and hospitable place for work and worship.

As the congregation's size continued to grow, it became increasingly clear that the church building was inadequate. More frequently now there was a need for extra chairs to be set in the aisles of the sanctuary after the pews were filled. The needs of the church school were more urgent. The children were crowded into a dark, dimly lit basement, their various classes separated only by thin curtains. In February, 1958, the members decided to build a substantial addition to the 1906 structure. A Building Committee was elected and, under the chairmanship of Frank Gifford, cooperated with the architects to complete plans for the addition.

The contract was let to H. D. Stanley of Gibsonia and construction began in September, 1958. Joseph McDonald, a retired carpenter and member of the congregation, generously donated his time and served as a valuable liaison between the Building Committee and the contractor. In the final stages of the project, he supervised a great deal of the volunteer labor employed in remodeling the older portion of the church. The completed work substantially modernized the exterior appearance of the church, the most striking addition being a lighted cross above the main entrance. Inside, the renovation included new classrooms for the church school and a new kitchen in the basement. On the ground floor, a choir room was created while the sanctuary was enlarged and equipped with a sizable Baldwin electric organ. The addition had nearly doubled the church's existing floor space. The total cost of the addition and refurbishing was $47,300. During the winter months while the work



H. Ross Karnes – 1955-1962

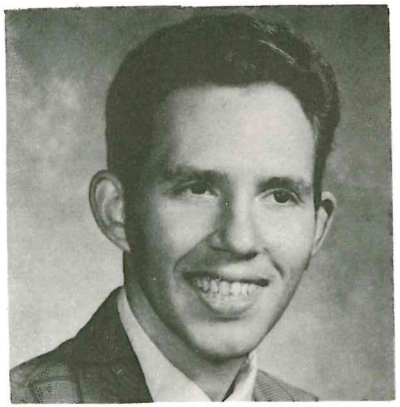
Kate Rea

was in progress, the congregation held its worship services in Fordam Grange Hall. The construction was completed in the Spring of 1959 and a dedication service was held on May 17, 1959. The principle speakers for the occasion were Professor Albert W. Dodds and President Addison Leitch, both of Pittsburgh-Xenia Theological Seminary.

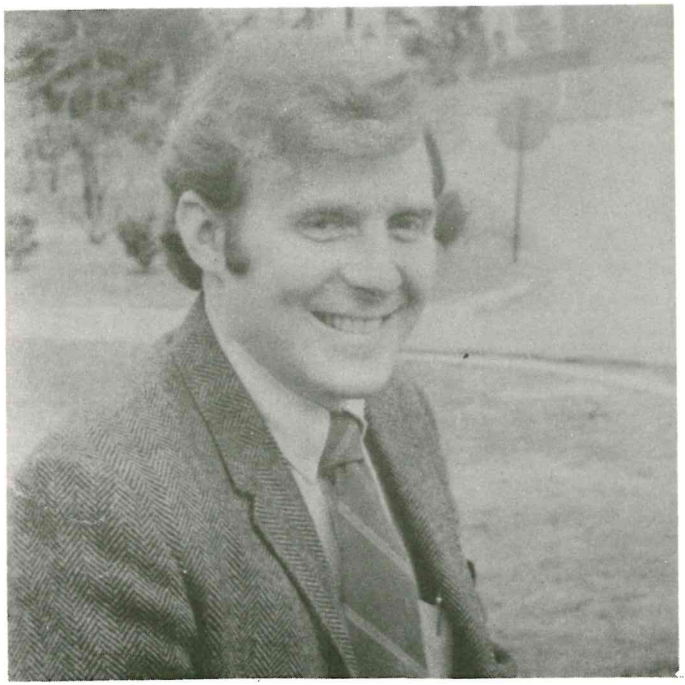
Another significant change which occurred during Karnes' ministry was the congregation's involvement in a major denominational union. In May, 1958, the United Presbyterian Church of North America joined together with the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America to form the new United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. The action resolved a Presbyterian division dating back to sixteenth century Scotland. Although the former Presbyterians were generally more liberal than the former United Presbyterians, the distinction had ceased to have any significant meaning. There was some nervous apprehension, especially at smaller congregations like Old Union, over the possibility that the old United Presbyterians, by far the smaller of the two denominations, would soon be lost in the new church body. Essentially, however, the merger had little direct effect on the local congregation.

When Karnes resigned as pastor in January, 1962, the congregation began immediately to search for a new minister. The Reverend E. B. Lawrence, a retired minister living in Meridian, served as interim pastor until the congregation called the Reverend John D. Thomas in January, 1963. Thomas had been born in Pittsburgh on November 30, 1925. He received his Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Pittsburgh in 1949 and his Bachelor of Divinity degree from Princeton Theological Seminary in 1952. He served the Mt. Ida Memorial Church in Troy, New York, until 1954 and then moved to the First Presbyterian Church, Coos Bay, Oregon. After serving that congregation as assistant pastor from 1955 to 1957, Thomas resigned to continue his studies at the Theological Seminary of San Francisco. He received his Master of Sacred Theology degree there in 1958. Then from 1959 to 1962, he worked toward the Doctor of Philosophy degree at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. Returning to the United States in 1962, he was installed as pastor of Old Union Church in 1963. He continued with the congregation until Easter of 1967 when he moved to Franklin, Pennsylvania.

John Thomas



William Tarbell



Dale T. O'Connell – 1968

OLD UNION REACHES OUT

Thomas was succeeded by the Reverend Dale T. O'Connell. Born in Pittsburgh in 1941, O'Connell studied for two years at Juniata College before completing his undergraduate work at Tarkio College in 1964. He began his ministry at Old Union in January, 1968, while still a student at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. He served as student pastor until he finished his seminary work in May, 1969. He was ordained and installed at Old Union on June 15, 1969.

During O'Connell's pastorate, Old Union made considerable changes in its patterns of work. First, for greater efficiency and coordination of effort, the congregation reorganized its Session and Board of Trustees into a single board. Under this unicameral system begun in January, 1970, the members of the new Session served simultaneously as elders and trustees. Secondly, effective June 1, 1973, the Old Union congregation entered into a cooperative ministry with neighboring Crestview Presbyterian Church in Callery. Under this arrangement, which the congregation approved on March 25, 1973, the two congregations maintained their separate identities but agreed to share a staff of two clergymen and coordinate certain activities and programs. The purpose was not to join or merge the churches but to strengthen the ministry of each by providing greater, more varied opportunities, especially in terms of professional staff. Dale O'Connell remained as senior pastor and William Tarbell, a seminarian at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, joined the congregations as his assistant. Old Union was to assume sixty per cent of the staff cost and Crestview, forty per cent. This form of cooperative ministry, still relatively new, has produced exciting results when tried elsewhere.

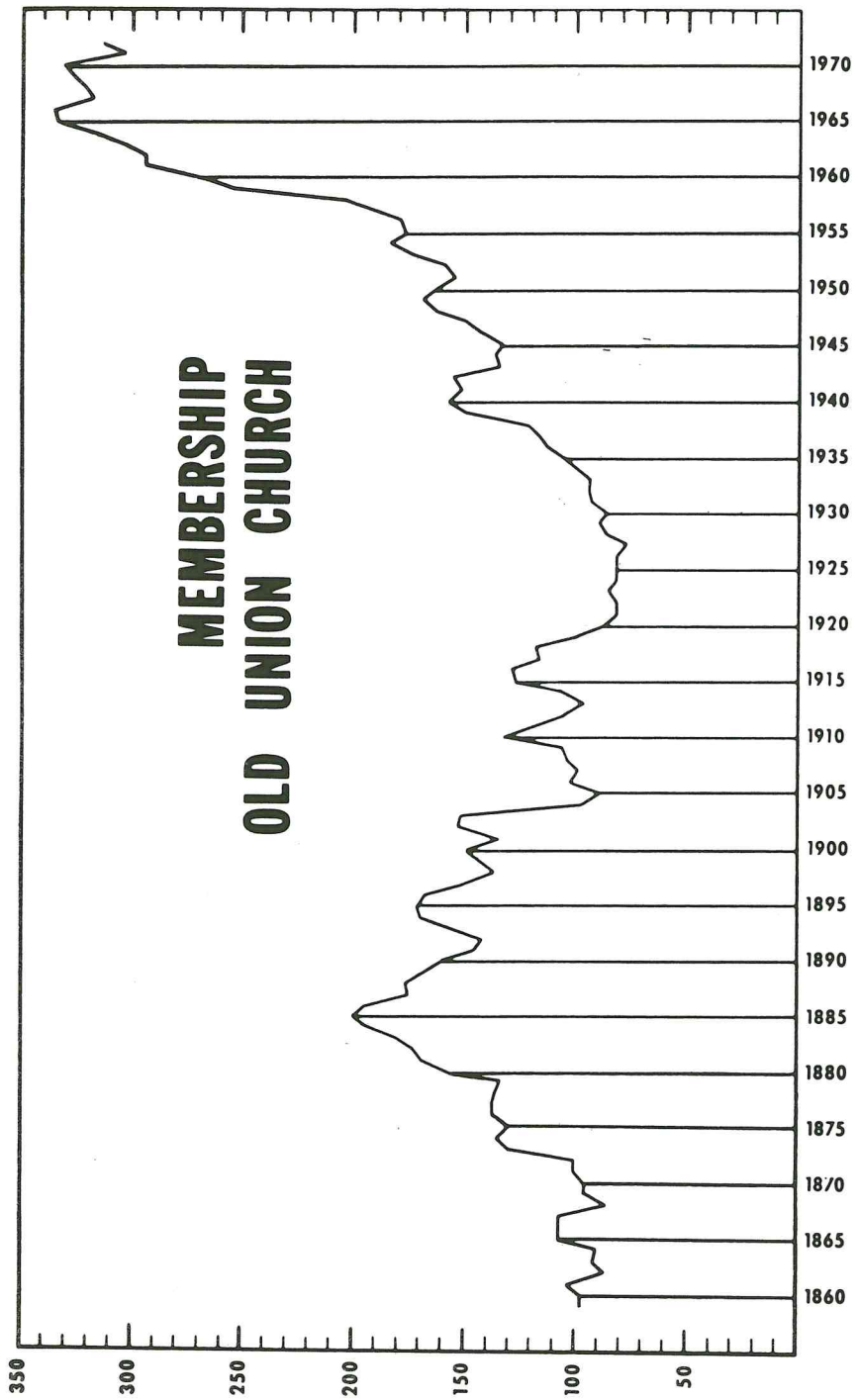
More important than new institutional forms, however, is the continued vitality and growth of the congregation. This has been marked by an increased awareness of the church's responsibility for outreach and mission, both to the local and larger national communities of which it is a part. Among other interests, it developed a close relationship with Butler-Beaver Presbytery's Urban-Industrial Ministry in Aliquippa. During the first five years of O'Connell's pastorate, the congregation's benevolence giving rose from five per cent of its total budget to twenty-two per cent. For much of the twentieth century, Old Union was a congregation in continual need of support. By the 1950's, it had become a self-supporting church. Now, most fittingly, Old Union seems to be a congregation able and willing to extend support to others. That is indeed a sign of a living church.

OLD UNION IN PERSPECTIVE

Over a century and a half has passed since the Reverend Matthew Williams organized the Old Union congregation in a grove of trees near Brownsdale. Within that time an almost unbelievable progression of events has transformed a simple pioneer community into an integral segment of a modern, industrial society. Today we speak glibly about automobiles; motion pictures, radio, television, atomic power, space stations, and moon walks–items which existed, if at all, only in the wildest dreams of the first members of the congregation. Old Union, too, has changed vastly from that frontier church of the early nineteenth century. As the new society has produced a new church, so it has provided a great challenge to that church.

Old Union once had the advantage of operating in a simpler, more homogeneous community. The church was the center not only of religious life, but also of the community's social life, its discipline, and its business. As long as work and worship were tied to gether so naturally, it was relatively easy for the individual Christian to see the connection between his faith and his action. But, over the years, many of these functions were assumed by other community and governmental institutions. Reflecting the nature of a highly specialized, modern society, the church, once a powerful, multi-function institution, now appears to many to be only one of many single-function institutions.

Among other things, this means that the church can no longer assume that an interest in religion exists automatically. Nor can it assume that there is a natural connection between faith and action. Modern man tends to compartmentalize his thoughts and his life. Concepts like justice and love become easily separated from business, political, and social relationships. It is in this setting that the church struggles to illuminate the unity of the Christian life and faith. Old Union has changed greatly; it must continue to change. The ability with which it can adapt its ministry to the developing needs of the congregation without compromising the basic tenets of its faith will determine its future.



A NOTE ON SOURCES

For those who enjoy exploring, many reminders of Old Union's past are still visible in the surrounding countryside. You can walk back into the cemetery behind the church and see the grave of James Glover. Or, find someone to direct you to the old Covenanter Woods where weather-worn gravestones still attest to the two feuding churches that once stood there side by side. On the Sabbath, you can visit the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Mars or the North Union Reformed Presbyterian Church north of Brownsdale where worship continues in the old nineteenth century manner. Or, you can drive to Pine Creek Church along Route 8 in Hampton Township and search through the old churchyard for the tomb of Matthew Williams.

For those who enjoy reading, there are many valuable books available. A good starting point would be Wallace N. Jamison, The United Presbyterian Story: A Centennial Study, 1858-1958 (Pittsburgh, Theological Issues in the Presbyterian Church since 1869 (Philadelphia, 1954). Older, but still useful, are George P. Hays, Presbyterians (New York, 1892), W. Melancthon Glasgow, History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America (Baltimore, 1888), and James Brown Scouller, History of the United Presbyterian Church of North America (New York, 1902). Biographical information on early clergymen is available in W. Melancthon Glasgow, Cyclopedic Manual of the United Presbyterian Church of North America (Pittsburgh, 1903) and James Brown Scouller, Manual of the United Presbyterian Church of North America (Pittsburgh, 1887). There is also much information on the early years of Old Union in the various histories of Butler County, especially the 1883 publication by Alfred Matthews.

There is one previous history of Old Union. S. L. Louden prepared a narrative for the 1931 Homecoming program which later in 1950 appeared in printed form. The Sesqui-Centennial program in 1956 borrowed heavily from this history. Certainly the most valuable source of information on Old Union's past is the book of minutes kept by the Session. It is complete from 1858, but accounts vary in quality with the different Clerks of Session and unfortunately are very limited during the long periods when there was no minister. Statistical information on Old Union – membership, finances, baptisms, and church school attendance – is available in the annual reports of the various denominations with which the church was affiliated.

Numerous people have generously provided information from memory or family records. They include: William A. Blakely, Irene S. Covert, William R. Dice, Roberta Louden Grubbs, George Hutton, Ross Karnes, Robert McCaslin, Mrs. J. O. McCown, Joseph McDonald, Ruth Celesta Miller, Dwight A. Nichol, Dale T. O'Connell, Kate Rea, Clifford E. Simpson, and John D. Thomas.

The photographs of the 1839 brick church and the fire of 1905 were taken by William Blakely. The cover design and art work are by Donna Evans Cashdollar.

C. D. C.